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SUBJECT: GONAIVES STILL DIGGING OUT AFTER FLOODING

PORT AU PR 00001511 001.2 OF 003

11. This message is sensitive but unclassified-please protect accordingly.

Summary

12. (SBU) Gonaives continues to dig out from mud that covered the city in tropical storm flooding in August and early September. The World Food Program plans to continue mass feeding programs, which benefit most city residents, until Christmas. Finding alternative shelter for 33,000 displaced persons as schools used as shelters are emptied for the opening of classes is the biggest challenge facing international aid organizations. The Venezuelans funnel their assistance directly through the mayor. MINUSTAH suspects he diverts some of it. There have been demonstrations accusing the mayor of corruption. The security situation is calm, although crime is returning to normal levels. The Argentinean battalion responsible for Gonaives is now completely focused on humanitarian operations. End summary.

13. (SBU) Ambassador visited the northeastern city of Gonaives October 22 to view the extent of the damage sustained in four hurricanes and tropical storms in August-early September. She was accompanied by PolCouns, an Embassy USAID economic growth official, and the Haiti Program Directors of IOM and CHF.

14. (U) These storms inflicted worse damage and more fatalities (almost 500) on Gonaives than on any other city in Haiti. The city which is barely above sea level, lies at the end of an extensive coastal mud flat at the end of the Artibonite valley. Decades of watershed degradation and hillside erosion make Gonaives vulnerable to flooding during heavy rains. The city still lies under a layer of dried mud up to one meter deep. Main thoroughfares have been partially cleared but remain covered by hard-pack mud. Mud cleared from these roads lies in piles along the side of the road awaiting removal. Most side streets remain covered in mud and remain impassible by vehicle traffic. People were shoveling mud from their dwellings and depositing it in the street. Since virtually all vehicular traffic is concentrated on a few central arteries, these are choked with traffic. Dump trucks loading and transporting mud, or stalled in deep holes obscured by water, are a major traffic obstruction. Stretches of liquid mud and standing water continue to obstruct short stretches of road. The most efficient means of transport in Gonaives is the motorcycle and bicycle.

The Assistance Picture

15. (U) World Food Program (WFP) representatives reported they are feeding virtually the entire city of Gonaives, and plan to do so until Christmas. This requires 4,500 tons of food. More was needed for areas outside of Gonaives. Coordinating with community block leaders WFP, is transitioning from dispersed food distributions to recipients in multiple localities to mass distributions in eight or ten central distribution points, each targeting 25-30,000 people. WFP plans to phase out mass food distributions in December and target the most needy (especially children and pregnant/lactating women) and schools; also, to undertake nutritional activity and initiate food for work programs. MINUSTAH's civil affairs representative in Gonaives, Jens Kristensen, reported that food distribution was effective and being coordinated with community leaders, who have not diverted donated items.

16. (U) WFP reported that shelter is a looming problem. Approximately 33,000 people remain in shelters, of which 23,000 are sheltered in schools. The latter, however, have to be cleared if school in Gonaives is to begin on the target date of November 10. (Note: the school year in the rest of Haiti began over one month late, on October 6, due to hurricane damage. End note.) WFP lacks the tents or accommodations in other buildings to house these displaced persons. WFP was thinking of giving them a 'return package' of equipment to help people return to still-unrepaired homes.

17. (SBU) The WFP representatives complained that the Government of Haiti places the full burden of the humanitarian response on the international community. The GOH has no plan to feed or shelter its displaced citizens. No one in the GOH is ready to assume

PORT AU PR 00001511 002.2 OF 003

responsibility. WFP met with school directors in an unsuccessful attempt to coordinate the movement of persons out of schools used as shelters. Nevertheless, these directors, anxious to get their buildings ready for the opening of school, often expelled their homeless residents with little notice. Once gone from shelters, these victims are difficult to locate and target with follow-on assistance.

18. (U) Overlaying the assistance picture is the cleanup challenge. Roads, public buildings and homes have to be cleared of mud. WFP said the means at hand were insufficient. They estimated it will take 200 trucks nine months to clear the city of mud.

Return to Normalcy as Political Tensions Rise

19. (SBU) Kristensen said MINUSTAH is observing a return to relative normalcy in Gonaives. Security is improving to the point that WFP is considering replacing MINUSTAH troop security escorts for food distributions with a less visible security presence, such as UN Police units. Some assistance foodstuffs are turning up in local markets, but not in large quantities. It is considered normal that people would sell some of their donated food to purchase other goods. On the other hand, MINUSTAH also observes a significant but not large-scale revival of crime and demonstrations against mayors suspected of influencing food distributions. There is an increase in reported rapes, 4-5 being reported in the previous two weeks. MINUSTAH has seen only one reported rape in a shelter.

110. (SBU) MINUSTAH's Kristensen and an aide reported that the influx of assistance has created fodder for conflict between mayors and authorities in the Artibonite Department, and between Principal and Deputy Mayors. (Note: Haitian municipalities elect a mayor and two deputies. End note.) The Departmental Delegate (Note: an official appointed by the central government to monitor the use of national funds by local elected officials. End note) accused the Mayor of Gonaives of corruption in the use of Government of Haiti assistance funds. Kristensen stated that Gonaives Mayor Stephen Moises personally supervised the offloading, storage, and distribution of food and other donations from Venezuela. Rumors persisted that he

diverted some of these goods for his own purposes. The Mayor has no influence over the much greater food and non-food assistance provided by other donors, but neither does he try to coordinate use of the Venezuelan aid with UN and other relief agencies.

¶11. (SBU) An aide to Kristensen reported that the influx of emergency appropriations from the Government of Haiti has created conflict between mayors and deputy mayors in many municipalities in the Artibonite Department. Currently, the Ministries of Interior and Planning required that mayors, but not their deputies, sign agreements on use of these funds. MINUSTAH thought that requiring the co-signature of at least one deputy mayor would encourage mayors and their deputies to agree.

MINUSTAH Troops Primarily Focused on Humanitarian Work

¶12. (SBU) The Artibonite Department, of which Gonaives is the largest city, is under the responsibility of an Argentinean Battalion. Battalion Commander Lt. Col. Ricardo Secotaro told the Ambassador that the local population is civil and respectful toward his troops, albeit not overtly friendly. He assessed the security situation as ''calm, with no serious problems.'' There are no kidnappings. Areas outside Gonaives are quieter. The Haitian National Police (HNP) is present in some areas of the Department but has been largely absent in the aftermath of the hurricanes. Now the Pakistani Formed Police Unit (FPU) and UN Police work with the HNP. (Note: Ambassador observed only one HNP officer in the course of the day in Gonaives. End note.) The overriding problem in the area is the obstruction of roads. Secotaro's battalion is focused predominantly on humanitarian work by providing medical assistance to the local population. They had carried out scores of medical rescues and evacuation of the severely injured. His troops had carried out over 500 evacuations by land, air and sea, including evacuation of 19 Cuban doctors. They had helped distribute over 2.5 million food rations and 250,000 liters of water.

Gonaives Mayor: More Aid Needed

PORT AU PR 00001511 003.2 OF 003

¶13. (SBU) Gonaives Mayor Stephen Moises greeted the Ambassador by reading a florid speech commending the work of the U.S. and the international community in Gonaives. In the following conversation with the Ambassador, he said there was much left for the international community to do. The central government has given Gonaives heavy equipment, which it was using for cleanup. Three million cubic meters of mud had to be removed. The Mayor noted that food assistance was going well and that 90 percent of the food problem was solved, but he complained that the mayor's office was ''excluded'' from the assistance process. (Comment: We believe the mayor would like to share in the political - and possibly the material - benefits of having a hand in the distribution of international assistance. End comment.)

USAID Projects Visited

¶14. (U) Ambassador visited the La Quinte River Bridge, where the river overflowed its banks and began the flooding of the city. The IOM Director explained a program that will begin soon to re-open an irrigation canal from the La Quinte River that will irrigate rice and corn fields. However, massive work to restore the watershed above the river is needed if future flooding is to be prevented. Ambassador also visited the Sisters of Charity clinic, which receives WFP food rations. With USAID funding, IOM refurbished the 800 meter-road leading to the clinic.

¶15. (U) Because of extreme traffic congestion and mud in the center of town, the Ambassador was unable to visit the Gonaives hospital that is being cleaned up by CHF, or visit the Raboteau community, one of the city's large slum communities that have generated crime and gang activity.

Sanderson